

I'm No Princess (Unless You're Referring to Leia) by ohmybgosh

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but Billy shows signs, too many Star Wars references

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Steve Harrington

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Summary:

Wherein Billy has a lot of dramatic feelings about Steve and Star Wars

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Author's Note:

- For [idkmybffspock](#).

Check out this incredible [art](#) of the hot tub scene!

Here you go, pal <3 Thank you for the request this was lots of fun to write! I hope this fulfills all your nerdy Billy needs!

Billy would definitely beat the shit out of Kylo Ren, just saying. Also, I know the Harrington's don't have a hot tub, and I know that in an Outsiders AU Steve would be Ponyboy, but Dally is the one with the leather jackets and hot tubs are good for sexy times so *shrugs*

When Billy was about ten years old his father took him to the theater to see *Star Wars* .

It had been a good day, one of the last good days. His Dad even let him pick out candy at the concessions, and when the movie started his Dad gave him a rare smile, reaching over to ruffle Billy's blond hair, which was growing long, just starting to curl around his ears.

His hair was something his parents fought about a lot, sometimes screamed at each other over. Billy liked when his hair was long, and his mom did, too. When he was eight it brushed his shoulders and his Dad glared at him, told his Mom that no son of his should walk around looking like - he used a word Billy didn't understand, but the way he said it, dangerous, spitting it out like it was the most foul tasting thing, made Billy shiver.

So he took his Dad's side when he fought with Billy's mother, nodding along as he listened to his parents fight in the room beside his.

And he hadn't cried the day his Mom sat him down at the table with

a pair of kitchen scissors, even though he really wanted to. But he didn't, because his Dad was watching with narrow eyes from the kitchen counter. His Dad did not like it when Billy cried.

That day in the theater was the last good day Billy could remember. A few days after, it seemed, his Mom got sick. She had bad days before, where she couldn't get out of bed or spent all day beside the toilet. Billy secretly loved these days. He didn't want his Mom to be sick, but when she was he got to spend the whole day with her, reading books and coloring and curling up under the covers beside her while she slept. His Dad never spent these days with them; it became a special sort of refuge where Billy could pretend nothing else existed.

But his Mom got really sick, so sick that she could no longer leave the house. At first Billy thought it was the best thing in the world, because he spent all his time by her side. But then she got too sick to read to him, to color with him. At the end she got so sick that she'd look at him with empty eyes, as if she no longer knew who he was.

When she died Billy was almost eleven. There were no more good days after that.

He saw the next two *Star Wars* movies by himself. He liked to go the matinee showings on the weekends. There was a big theater right by the beach closest to his home, and there was something magical about hiding away in the dark in theater while the waves crashed against the sand outside, and when he finally emerged the bright blinding sun stung his eyes.

He always went to the double features. The movies let him escape, let him hide away and pretend he belonged behind the screen, if only for a few hours.

He saw a lot of movies (he saw both *Indiana Jones* movies a number of times, but that was another matter entirely) but *Star Wars* were his favorites. He learned all the names of the planets and the characters. He dreamed about droids and spaceships, and a beautiful badass princess and a Jedi who would find him and take him away from his shitty life on some grand adventure.

And he loved Han Solo. He liked to imagine himself as Han Solo, as a snarky space rebel who captained the Millennium Falcon and went around rescuing princesses and helping to save the galaxy.

His Dad never took him to the movies again. He stopped playing baseball with Billy in the yard. By the time Billy was twelve his Dad started bringing over women, some of them were nice but most of them acted like Billy didn't exist.

Billy sometimes daydreamed about Han Solo and Princess Leia, married with a son. Their house in his mind was much nicer than his. They never fought and their son never heard crashes from their room, and they took their son to the park, and got him a puppy for Christmas. Han Solo told his son he loved him every night before he tucked him into bed. And Princess Leia never got sick.

His Dad started drinking and by the time Billy was thirteen his Dad had begun to get violent. He always said the same thing when he was angry. *There's something wrong with you, Billy. I'm just trying to help.*

Sometimes he'd still be nice to Billy, sometimes he'd still smile at him, but his blue eyes were always dark. Billy learned not to trust him anymore.

When he was fourteen he saw a magazine at a kiosk on the boardwalk by the beach; it had Harrison Ford on the cover, smoking a cigarette. Billy started smoking then, too, because all the kids did it and Harrison Ford just made it look so cool.

He had a poster of Han Solo on his wall for almost a week. When his Dad saw it something about Harrison Ford's handsome face made him angry, so he tore it down and crumpled it up and smacked Billy so hard across the face that he had a bruise for weeks, and the school counselor called him into her office to ask if everything was ok.

When Max and Susan came along Billy was sixteen and angry at the world. The only good thing, he thought, that came out of it was his Dad giving him his car, with explicit instructions that it was to be used for Max and school only, and if he could learn Respect and Responsibility, than he could keep it. It was a constant battle over the car - when Billy got into shit his Dad would smack him around and

take the keys. He'd only get them back if Max had to go somewhere or if he was quiet and polite for a few days.

He loved his car; he'd be lying if he said he didn't imagine himself as Han Solo speeding through the galaxy when he flew down the California highways.

They moved to Hawkins when he was seventeen. He thought it was the worst thing that could've happened, and it was, until he met Steve Harrington.

Things had been good, because Billy existed in a world that Steve did. He couldn't help but fall for him, because Steve was like the sun, warm and golden, and Billy was like a lonely little planet that got sucked into Steve's orbit.

(When Billy was really little, about four or five years old, his Mom used to take him to the beach on her days off. On a good day his Dad would join them, sticking to the towel laid out in the sand, smiling over at them from the top of his book as they built sandcastles together, laughing when Billy's Mom scooped him up, dunking his flailing feet into the salty sea.

Little Billy had a bad habit of staring at the sun, especially at the beach; he couldn't help it, it was just so bright and bold and beautiful. His mom warned him again and again not to stare, that if he looked too long his eyes would melt, dribble down his cheeks, and he'd have to live the rest of his life behind dark sunglasses. She loved his eyes. She said they were so blue, just like the sea and just like his Dad's. He still stared at the sun, though, until there were stars in his eyes, and his head spun.

He did the same with Steve. Except he didn't have stars in his eyes, more like hearts, and his head didn't spin because of ultraviolet rays, it spun because Steve Harrington inhabited the same galaxy as Billy, and he was so radiant, and the fact that Billy had fallen so hard and so fast gave him a headache.)

Things got bad, then, because Billy was full of rage and hated how nothing seemed to work in his favor. When Max beat him in the Byers house that night, he stopped trying to pretend that all of it

wasn't his fault in the first place.

One day, in late November of 1984, he was putting laundry away for Susan because his Dad told him to, and he went into Max's room to set some t-shirts on her bed. She was at the park with her nerdy friends; he had to pick her up in two hours.

He stood in the middle of her room, looking at all her things, and he felt as if his breath was slowly being sucked out of his lungs. He saw her broken skateboard that she had attempted to duct-tape together. There was a walkie talkie on her desk; she used it to talk to her friends when home. She talked a lot with Lucas Sinclair and a girl named El that Billy had only ever seen once, outside of the middle school dance when he picked Max up. She had several crayon drawings hung up on her walls, spaceships and aliens with dozens of different colors. Max didn't draw them, and the fact that one of her nerdy little friends drew them for her and she went home and hung them up made Billy's chest hurt. Max also had a small, chipped plastic figurine of Princess Leia on her windowsill. He didn't even know she liked *Star Wars* .

He stood there for several long minutes. He didn't realize he was crying until he tasted salty tears in his mouth. He rubbed his eyes, angry with himself. He set Max's clothes on her pillow and slipped out, heading outside to stand in the cold and smoke a cigarette, hoping the familiar feeling of the butt between his fingers would make his hands stop shaking.

He couldn't get rid of the image of her snapped skateboard, even when he pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes.

There's something wrong with you, Billy.

He spent the money his grandmother sent him, for his birthday that year, on a new skateboard the next day.

When he gave it to her, knocking on her bedroom door and handing it to her without a word, she didn't take it right away. She stared at it for a long time, her blue eyes wide. After a moment she blinked. Her small hands reached out tentatively.

“Is this for me?” She sounded unsure.

“Yeah.”

She took it, cradling it in her arms like it was going to fall apart at any moment.

“Thanks?”

“Sure.” He made to leave, then stopped, glanced at her over his shoulder. “Hey, Max?”

“Yeah?” she asked, still holding the board so gently, examining it carefully. She spun one of the wheels.

“I’m,” he began, faltering when his voice cracked. He swallowed, tried again. “Sorry.”

She looked up at him. She didn’t say anything, just stared, eyes watery. After a moment he turned away, left her in the doorway and went to his own room, quietly easing the door shut.

They didn’t talk about the skateboard, both pretending it never happened. But there was something unspoken between them after that. It was silent agreement that passed from there on out: Max’s forgiveness in exchange for Billy’s effort to do better.

Steve happened slowly. For Billy, the second he spotted Steve, across a room of drunken teenagers, beer dribbling down his own chin, he wanted him, wanted to shove him unceremoniously against a wall and suck him off until he came apart beneath Billy’s hands.

Steve was the sun, a fluorescent lamp, and Billy was a planet, a moth that physically could not tear himself away. He found himself drawn to Steve, subconsciously seeking him out at school just to see his face. It scared Billy, because he sometimes felt like he had no control over it.

He couldn’t help it, though. He sought Steve out at school, pushed his buttons because he was an asshole and it was the only way he knew

how to be. When Steve punched Billy it had been the best kind of pain; he didn't feel helpless, he felt alive. He got carried away, fucked it all up, and would've destroyed every chance of ever coming back if Max hadn't stopped him.

There's something wrong with you, Billy.

He didn't seek Steve out after that. He couldn't look at his face. At night he lay in bed, and his eyes hurt and his chest ached and his skin tingled like a peeling sunburn, and he thought about how warm and golden Steve was.

Steve, though, started staring at him, right before Christmas break. It made Billy's head spin to think about it, because he didn't want to get caught up in what-if's. He didn't want to hope because he had a feeling it'd lead to a broken heart, more broken than it already was.

So Billy tried to ignore it, the staring.

He went home for a week hoping that things would go back normal when school started in January. He didn't see Steve all that week, purposefully avoiding all the places Steve could be, and spent most of the week silent and subdued at home or driving somewhere out of Hawkins, to get away. The highlight of the week had been a snowball fight with Max on Christmas morning (she started it, poking her head out the front door while he shoveled the driveway at his Dad's request. He didn't see her, but she shouted "hey asshole!" and when he turned he got a snowball straight to the face).

Steve still stared at him when they returned after the new year. It made Billy's skin crawl, it made his fingers tingly and his stomach flutter. He'd done a good job not thinking about Steve - apart from when he woke up in the morning and when he showered at home alone. Those times he couldn't help but jerk off to the memory of the smell of Steve at practice, sweaty on the court and, later in the locker room showers, the sweet musky smell of the expensive looking soap he brought from home. Billy had taken to showering as far as possible from Steve after practice, but Steve still watched him from all the way across the room.

He slipped up every now and then with the staring, though. When

Steve had his back to him in the showers or two seats ahead of him in Physics or right next to him in English, Billy couldn't help it. He watched the muscles in Steve's shoulders strain as he tried to reach the middle of his back, his stupid freckles so dark against his pale skin that turned slightly pink under the hot water, his long brown hair curling at the base of his neck, creeping under the collar of his polos and sweaters.

A week after they returned in January Steve finally approached him, on a Monday afternoon between third and fourth period.

Billy stood at his locker, trying to shove Max's skateboard in with his books (her middle school locker was too small to fit it along with her puffy winter coat, so he offered to store it in his. Even though he told her every time she wouldn't be able to use it in the snow, she stubbornly brought it all the same, in the hopes that the parking lot wouldn't be too icy one day).

"I don't think you have room in there." Steve's voice was right behind him. Steve was so close Billy could smell his expensive soap.

Billy jumped, dropping the skateboard and several notebooks on the linoleum floor, with a clatter that echoed down the hallway. Blushing, furious with himself and Steve's soap that smelled so good, he knelt down to gather it all up, waving Steve away when he tried to help.

He straightened and attempted to shove the skateboard in again.

"Seriously, Billy, it's not gonna fit," Steve chuckled. Billy's heart skipped a beat, because Steve was talking to him and had called him *Billy*.

"It fit before," he mumbled.

"Is that Max's?"

"Yeah." Billy shifted some books, trying again. One wheel still stuck out and he swore, because Steve was smiling beside him and the skateboard had chosen the worst fucking moment to not fit.

“Is this hers too?”

Billy pushed the board and slammed the locker shut before it could fall again.

“What?” He turned, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand, and froze.

Steve held out the creased picture of Harrison Ford, in full Han Solo get up, the picture Billy tore out of a magazine years ago, the picture he stuck in his copy of *Hamlet* for English class, because it was just nice to look at sometimes.

“Is this that guy from *Star Wars* ?”

He snatched it out of Steve’s hand and shoved it in his pocket.

“What do you want, Harrington?” he snapped.

Steve’s smile slipped a bit and he ran a hand through his hair.

“I just - I just wanted to say.” He looked away, scratching the back of his neck. Billy followed the movement subconsciously, his tongue running along his lower lip.

“Lucas told me you apologized. That means a lot, you know.”

“Oh.” Billy shrugged. He apologized to Lucas weeks ago, catching up with him outside of the Arcade one afternoon. He meant it, because he had been a bigger asshole than normal, and he had been repeating his father’s words when he said those things to Max and when he shoved Lucas in the Byers’ kitchen. He didn’t think about anyone but himself in that moment and it made him sick now. He knew Lucas was important to Max, too, and he was really trying to make things up to her.

“Yeah,” Steve said. There was an awkward moment, where Steve examined his white sneakers, hands in his pockets, soft brown hair falling in front of his beautiful brown eyes. Billy’s heart was starting to ache. Steve’s lips were chapped and Billy wanted to kiss them so badly it was making his head spin.

"Well -" he began, planning to excuse himself, because he was starting to get a boner and really didn't want to have to deal with that at school.

"Do you wanna come over later?" Steve blurted. His cheeks reddened and he bit his lip, glancing briefly at Billy.

"Me?" Billy hadn't meant to say it, but it slipped out, surprised.

"If you want," Steve said quickly. He looked away, and Billy suddenly thought he was nervous. The possibility of Steve Harrington being nervous around him made his pulse pound in his ears.

"My parents are away for the night, going to visit my aunt, and I have beer, so I figured, if you want to. The pool's empty because of the snow, but the hot tub still works, not that you have to go in, it's just something to do, you know." Steve was babbling now.

Billy smiled slowly, and he thought, unless the universe was playing some sick joke on him, that Steve Harrington was asking him out.

"Just me?" He had to be sure.

"I haven't asked anyone else," Steve said. "But if you want -"

"No!" It was a little too forceful but Billy didn't care. "No, I'd love to."

"Cool. Ok. Right." Steve nodded. "Um, anytime after four is good. For you to come over, I mean."

"I gotta make dinner for Max, but I can be there by six." Susan and his father were both working late. But at least one of them would be home before then.

"Sure," Steve nodded. He gave Billy a shy smile. "See you at six."

Billy watched him disappear down the hallway, his mouth open slightly. He definitely had a hard on by now, but he didn't care because Steve Harrington had just asked him out. Steve Harrington wanted to drink beer with him in his hot tub. Holy shit.

That evening Billy paced the kitchen. His hands were shaking with nerves, and he'd already spilled frozen peas all over the kitchen floor. His father and Susan hadn't left explicit instructions about dinner, and he was no cook, so he just boiled some spaghetti, drained it and threw some tomato sauce in there, washed the peas off once he gathered them all from the floor and boiled those, too.

Making one turn around the kitchen he stopped, glanced at the clock. It was ten minutes to six and neither parent was home yet.

"Why're you pacing?" Max asked, around a mouthful of pasta. She sat at the kitchen table, plate and glass of milk in front of her, a book open in one hand.

"I'm not." He glanced at the clock again.

"Where are you going tonight?" Max twirled spaghetti around her fork, brought it to her mouth and slurped, specks of sauce landing on her cheeks.

"Nowhere."

"C'mon, Billy. What's going on?"

Billy grimaced at her. She was too perceptive.

She stared at him from her seat at the table, eyebrows creased in that stubborn look of hers. Without breaking eye contact, she picked up her glass of milk, took a long sip, and set it back down, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Nothing," he said.

"Liar."

"Nosy brat."

Max crossed her arms. "Don't be an asshat."

Billy snorted; sometimes the insults Max came up with were

ridiculous. "I'm sorry."

"You look nervous."

Billy frowned. "I'm not."

He was, though; his stomach seemed to be doing backflips the closer the big hand on the kitchen clock inched towards six.

"Do you have a date?"

Billy's face heated up and he looked away. "No."

"Ha!" Max pointed at him triumphantly. "You're going on a date."

"Congrats, you solved it," Billy snapped.

He looked at the clock. It was 6:02. His heart leapt in his throat. What if his Dad and Susan were *really* late, and Steve said "fuck you, Billy Hargrove" and locked his door and never ever smiled at Billy again?

Max stared at him for a long moment, her grin slowly slipping away, her eyes narrowing. "Who are you meeting?"

Billy bit his lip. He knew that sound in Max's voice; no one in their family ever talked about it directly but the suspicion was always there. *Why are you dressed like that? Who are you seeing tonight? Don't make me do this again, son.*

There's something wrong with you, Billy.

It wasn't Max's fault, he reminded himself. She didn't understand.

"I -" he started.

The front door swung open, a blast of cold air blowing in from outside, and Susan entered, shivering. She shut the door tight and stomped her snowy shoes on the mat.

Billy pushed his chair back with a scrape, standing.

"Sorry I'm late," Susan sighed, shrugging out of her coat. "So much paperwork I had to catch up on. Maxine, eat your peas, please."

Billy glanced at the clock. It was 6:15 by now. He cleared his throat.

"I have to go out," he said in a rush. "I have a - a study date. For science. Science class."

Susan nodded, giving him a small, awkward smile. She stepped on eggshells around Billy, always unsure of how to deal with her loud, angry, abused stepson.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Max smirking at her spaghetti. She didn't say anything, though, just scooped up a mouthful of peas and shoved them in her mouth.

"That's fine," Susan said. "Neil knows?"

"Yes," Billy lied. He hadn't mentioned anything to his father, hadn't had the time, but he would deal that later. The most important thing now was getting to Steve Harrington's house before it was too late.

"Alright. Just be back by 10. Have fun!"

Billy nodded, grabbing his coat from the hook by the door and rushing out.

He drove wildly to Steve's, dangerously, tires skidding on the ice in several spots. His heart pounded the whole way there. He was late, and if Steve decided he didn't want to wait...

He jumped out of the car when he stopped in the Harrington's driveway. The large house looked lonely, a single light on downstairs in one of the many windows.

Billy jogged to the front door, knocked carefully. He waited. There was no response so he tried again, harder this time. There was still no answer.

Heart hammering, he pounded on the door, suppressing the urge to shout "Harrington!"

This couldn't be it; he'd thought about this for so long and this couldn't be the end already. It wasn't fair.

After a minute, when his fist hurt from knocking so hard, the front door yanked open.

Steve stood there, in a blue sweater and gray sweats, mismatching socks, headphones around his neck and walkman in one hand.

“Sorry, didn’t hear you,” he said, waving the walkman in the air. His brown eyes flicked over Billy, standing awkwardly in the doorway, breathing heavily. “You’re a little late.”

Billy’s face heated up. “I know, I’m sorry.”

A small smile creeped across Steve’s face, the hint of a blush tinging his cheeks.

“Come in,” he said, stepping aside.

Billy entered, moving out of the way for Steve to shut the door. He glanced around, and felt very, very small all of a sudden.

From the look of Steve’s house on the outside and the clothes Steve wore and his shiny BMW and the fancy soap he used in the showers, Billy had known Steve’s parents were wealthy. But being inside the Harrington household made it impossible to ignore.

A large fireplace carved out the living room, partially blackened logs sitting in the hearth. There was a glass cabinet with fine china, crystal goblets, and several expensive looking trinkets that seemed to come from far away places. There was a huge bookshelf, leather titles reflecting the lone light in the living room. The couch and the easy chairs were of a flowery upholstery. The fancy rug in the dining room looked like it hadn’t seen a speck of dust in years.

The worst part was the photos.

Gilded framed photographs lined the wall of the carpeted stairway leading upstairs: photographs of Steve’s parents, various other family members, but mostly of Steve himself; an adorably dimpled baby Steve, less than a year old but already with a mass of brown hair; a young Steve on his first day of kindergarten, grinning, front teeth missing, backpack too large on his scrawny shoulders, two thumbs up at the camera; a middle school Steve waving his arms on stage, for

music or theater, Billy didn't know; a slightly younger Steve than the one beside him now, a freshman or sophomore Steve with shorter hair, looking determined during a basketball game; and every single school portrait, from preschool all the way to senior year.

Billy swallowed down a lump that had risen in his throat. He blinked at the photos of Steve.

He felt like a slug in a teacup, like a rat in a bakery, unwelcome and unsavory, in his jeans that were starting to tear at the cuffs, his long-sleeve gray t-shirt that had a small hole in the left armpit, in his beloved leather jacket that he'd had almost four years now.

There was only one photo of a young Billy in his house, a small polaroid of his mother, cradling him on his first Christmas. It wasn't framed; it stuck to the refrigerator, under a *San Diego Zoo* magnet. It had faded a lot over the years, so much so that Billy could no longer remember what color his mother's dress was. It frequently fell to the floor when someone flung the fridge open. Billy was always the one to pick it back up, sliding it carefully back into place.

Steve followed his gaze.

"I know, it's a lot," he laughed nervously. He ran a hand through the back of his hair. "I'm their only child, you know?"

Billy didn't know. He had been an only child, for most of his life, but it wasn't like this. Nothing at all like this.

"Yeah," he said anyway. His voice sounded husky, too rough. He avoided Steve's gaze, which he could feel on the back of his neck.

"Um," Steve said after a moment. "Beer?"

"Sure."

Steve headed into the kitchen, headphones still around his neck. After a moment, gathering his wits and willing the lump in his throat away, Billy followed.

The kitchen was large, but average, making Billy feel a little less out of his element. Kitchens always looked the same to him; the size

mattered but the layout of each kitchen was generally universal. He had a feeling, though, that the Harrington's counters were real granite, and that if he opened the cabinets he'd see expensive cutlery, tea cookies, and handcrafted wine from the vineyards of Italy or some shit.

Steve opened the fridge, leaning down to push a large tupperware of salad out of the way. Billy caught a flash of a yellow post-it note on the lid, making out the beginning of a note, words in fancy handwriting, "*Sweet Pea, for dinner*", but then Steve shifted, blocking the view.

He pulled out a six pack and shut the door.

He took two out, opening a drawer and grabbing a silver bottle opener, cracking the cap off them and turning to hand a bottle to Billy.

"C'mere, I'll show you the hot tub."

Steve led him out to the patio, dusted in snow. He skirted around the empty, icy pool, giving it a nervous look, and headed towards the hot tub.

Billy heard it bubbling. Steam rose up in plumes, mixing in the air and melting the snowflakes before they could get too close.

Steve stopped at the steps, rubbed the back of his neck nervously. He glanced at Billy, debating for a second, and then, taking a swig of his beer, set the bottle on the side of the hot tub, shimmied out of his sweats and socks, pulled off his walkman and peeled off his sweater. He didn't wear an undershirt and for some reason that knowledge struck a chord deep in the pit of Billy's stomach, the fact that Steve had been going to school, sitting beside Billy in English class, wearing those stupid sweaters with nothing on underneath, that fine dusting of dark hair on his chest that disappeared on his stomach but then reappeared just below his navel, and those freckles, all those fucking freckles sprinkled across his shoulders and his back, this fact made Billy's mouth dry, because *had he known* -

"It's nice, in the winter," Steve said.

He picked up his beer, took another drink. He curled his toes against the cold tile, shifting his feet, standing out in the dark in January in nothing but his briefs, navy blue Calvin Kleins. Goosebumps covered his arms and he shivered a little.

“It’s cool, ‘cause the water’s really hot, but you can still see the snow falling. It’s a neat contrast.” Steve waved one hand in the direction of the hot tub, as if to illustrate.

Billy, for once in his life, couldn’t seem to speak. He opened his mouth, trying, but his voice hid somewhere in his chest. It didn’t make a difference, for he couldn’t form a single coherent thought. The only word his brain could muster was *Steve* .

Steve in his Calvins, skin going pale in the cold, running a hand through his hair nervously.

Steve, swallowing, taking another swig of beer, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and saying “Um.”

He climbed into the hot tub, holding his beer above the water, and sighed, a small smile on his face. He closed his eyes briefly.

“You coming?” he asked, opening his eyes and raising his eyebrows at Billy.

Billy set his beer on the steps. He shrugged out of his jacket, dropping it beside Steve’s clothes, and lifted his shirt off. He knelt down, undoing the laces of his boots with trembling hands. He tried to hold them steady but they were too cold, too anxious.

He pulled his boots and socks off, then his jeans, too, until he wore only his briefs and his necklace.

He climbed into the hot tub, taking his beer with him.

Steve was right - it was sort of magical in the winter. Billy looked up at the sky, dark and cloudy, snowflakes falling all around them. They melted in the steam before they could touch his face. He smiled; it felt like they were in another galaxy, he could almost pretend the snowflakes were falling stars.

"It's nice," he murmured, and then felt sort of stupid. But Steve didn't seem to hear him; he had his head back, resting against the side of the tub, eyes closed. He looked so serene.

Billy's stomach did a backflip, that feeling of (he didn't like the word, but he had no other word for it) infatuation hitting him full force. That was what it was, he knew. He'd never felt so nervous, his feelings plunging headfirst into the deep without him, his heart making decisions far beyond his control. He'd never felt anything like this in his entire life. It scared him and he wasn't sure what to do about it.

He chugged his beer, needing that extra warmth and pleasant dizziness to spur his confidence. He finished it in two gulps and set it on the side of the tub.

Heart thumping wildly, he stretched his leg out under the water, unbending his knee, stretching until he found Steve's leg. He prodded Steve's thigh with his toes.

Steve opened his eyes, blinking, and lifted his head up. The tips of his hair were wet, curling against his neck.

"Yes?"

"You sleeping?"

Steve chuckled. "No. Just thinking."

Acting much braver than he felt, Billy stood, closing the short distance between them. He reached down and stole Steve's beer, finishing the last of it and tossing it aside. He thought he heard it shatter, in the distance, but he couldn't be sure, his heart was hammering loudly in his ears.

"Hey," Steve said indignantly. He opened his mouth to say more, then stopped short, lips parted, his eyes on the spot where Billy's briefs, soaked, clung to his hips.

The confident side of Billy, the side that tended to hide when Steve was nearby, reminded the not-so-confident side of Billy, a little smugly, that he was rather well-endowed, that he had nothing to be

ashamed of in the face of nudity.

He leaned in, placing a hand on the rim of the tub on either side of Steve. He met Steve's eyes, and he swallowed, his heart feeling like it would thump right out of his chest.

Steve's brown eyes looked dark from far away, but close up Billy could see they were bright, little flecks of gold in there twinkling like Christmas light, and the merry hints of green, too. He had a tiny freckle at the corner of one eye, and a little white scar cut through the top of one eyebrow, so small that Billy had never seen it before. His eyelashes were so dark and thick.

Steve blinked, his pupils dilated.

Billy kissed him.

He meant for it to be slow. He wanted it to be chaste, romantic. He wanted to ease his way in, taste Steve at every interval.

But then Steve lifted one hand out of the water, placing it on Billy's hip bone, and Billy couldn't stop himself.

He sank to his knees, straddling Steve. He gripped the back of Steve's neck, fingers curling in his hair, and pushed his tongue into Steve's mouth, tasting the beer that still lingered at the back of his throat.

Steve responded enthusiastically. He wrapped both arms around Billy's waist, pulling him in close.

Billy had never been kissed by anyone like Steve Harrington before, and the way Steve kissed took his breath away, making him dizzy and blind like the sun had at the beach.

He knew Steve was a great kisser, he could see it in the way Steve smoked cigarettes in the school parking lot, in the way he stuck his pen in his mouth in class when he was thinking hard. And then there were the rumors, the rumors that kind of made Billy feel crazy, lying in his bed at night and thinking about all those girls people whispered about, thinking about how promiscuous everyone said King Steve was, before Nancy Wheeler. He knew all this, he thought about it too often. But experiencing it was an entirely different beast.

He hadn't done it justice in his own thoughts. He wasn't at all prepared for it.

Steve knew exactly what to do with his mouth, his hands. He sucked on Billy's lower lip, biting down when Billy made a tiny sound. He ran his fingers down Billy's back, working their way down and around to his thighs, hooking behind his knees and pulling Billy, already hard, flush against his stomach.

Billy saw stars and he broke away, sucking in a sharp breath. He sort of forgot how to breathe for a minute.

Steve, chest rising and falling slowly, stared at him, tongue darting out to lick his lips.

"Is this too fast?" he asked, voice hoarse.

"No." He pushed his hair back, mustering up a smirk to save face. "Is it too fast for you, Harrington?"

"Shut up," Steve said easily.

One hand came up, cupping the back of Billy's neck, and he pulled Billy in again, sticking his tongue in his mouth and drawing a small sigh out of Billy. Billy hadn't know he could make those noises until now.

Steve's other hand, under the hot water, palmed at Billy's briefs. Steve broke away, breathing deeply. He ran his pointer finger along the elastic band.

"Can I take these off?"

Billy, at a loss for words, just nodded. He closed his eyes when Steve dragged them down around his ankles, and he felt Steve's hand leave him, felt Steve moving beneath him, taking his Calvins off. Steve let their underwear go under the water; they floated somewhere but Billy didn't really care to look at the time. Eyes still closed, he pinched his own arm under the water, just to be sure this wasn't an incredibly vivid dream.

It hurt so he opened his eyes.

“Come here,” Steve murmured, voice soft. He put one hand at the small of Billy’s back, pulling him in close. Steve gripped himself with his other hand under the water, his breath hitching and eyelashes fluttering against his cheek.

Billy swallowed. His eyes stung and it had nothing to do with the chlorine. He’d never seen anyone or anything so beautiful in his life, not even the sun. A part of him felt like he was watching a secret unfold, like he was stealing someone else’s time, like this was something too perfect, too special for someone like him to witness.

When Steve took Billy’s hand, guiding him down to wrap Billy’s fingers around the both of them, Steve’s fingers folding over his, Billy stopped thinking, because if this was someone else’s moment they’d have to pry it away from his cold dead body.

He pressed his face into Steve’s neck. He kissed Steve’s skin, gently, softly so Steve wouldn’t notice. Steve didn’t; he had his eyes closed, mouth slightly open, free hand coming up and out of the water to tangle in Billy’s hair.

He wasn’t sure how long it had been, he knew it wasn’t long enough, but he couldn’t help himself he was already so close.

Billy couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see anything apart from Steve’s beautiful brown eyes, couldn’t hear anything but Steve’s ragged breathing and the bubbles around them, couldn’t taste anything other than that fancy soap and the chlorine at the base of Steve’s neck, couldn’t feel anything other than his blood pounding, other than Steve’s hand, smaller and softer, over his and adding pressure.

Billy Hargrove never came first but he did this time.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, pulling his shaky hands away. Steve grabbed his wrist under the water.

“Don’t stop.” Steve guided his hand back.

Billy wrapped his fingers around just Steve this time, and Steve tilted his head back, breathing out a long “ah” that raised the tiniest bit in pitch at the end. Billy watched him in awe. He fantasized about

having Steve under his hands, nearly every night, and now he had Steve, so close, in his grip.

He quickened his pace.

Steve didn't say Billy's name when he finished. Billy hoped he would; he'd been thinking for hours about the sound of his own name in the hallway earlier that day, and he wanted to hear it again, in every tone, even the angry or aggravated ones. He'd never really cared for his name one way or the other, but the way it sounded in Steve's voice had felt right, somehow.

Steve did gasp, "God!", though, right when he came, his arms wrapping around Billy's neck, breathing heavily in Billy's ear.

"God," Steve said again, much softer, forehead against Billy's shoulder. He took a moment to catch his breath.

"That was," Steve sighed.

"Good?" Billy supplied. He smiled, satisfied, because he was no God, but he could make Steve Harrington orgasm, and he thought the latter was more exhilarating.

"Yeah," Steve laughed shakily.

He lifted his head off Billy's shoulder. "Wanna get out and dry off? I feel kinda pruny." He indicated his wrinkled fingers.

Billy found their briefs, half stuck in a jet, and pulled them out. They were soaked, and he debated trying to put them on for a second before Steve reached out to take them.

"I'll get a towel," he said, and stood, climbing out of the tub.

With a little difficulty, he pulled on his sweats and jogged inside with the soaked underwear, returning a moment later with two towels.

He held out a towel for Billy and Billy climbed out, shivering slightly in the cold, and draped the towel around himself.

"I can lend you some dry underwear," Steve said, crouching down to

gather up their clothing. He straightened, the walkman headphones dangling from the bundle in his arms. "There's more beer, if you want to hang out for a bit. Or you don't have to, if you've gotta go."

"I don't have to be anywhere," Billy said, and he didn't know what time it was but he thought he still had a couple hours until ten.

Later, back in his clothes and a pair of Steve's briefs that were just a tiny bit too tight, Billy sat on the Harrington's couch in front of the fireplace, a beer in hand and watching with amusement as Steve crouched over a smoldering log, poking a bit of newspaper underneath with the copper fire poker that hung from a hook on the mantle.

"Are you sure you know how to do this?"

"Yes," Steve said stubbornly. "I was a boy scout. Isn't this the first thing you learn?"

"Is it?" Billy snorted.

"I can't remember," Steve sighed. He sat back on his heels, resting the poker against the wall and taking a long drink from his beer.

"It's the thought that counts, right?"

"It was a nice thought." Billy patted the space beside him. "C'mere, Harrington, you're fighting a losing battle."

Steve sat beside him, knees just barely brushing but nothing else.

"So, Han Solo?" Steve prompted after a moment, a small smile on his lips.

"I don't want to talk about it." Billy put his face in his hands.

"Hey, I'm not teasing you. They're good movies."

Billy glanced at him in disbelief. "You've seen them?"

"Just the first two," Steve said, shrugging. "Dustin and his friends dragged me into their movie night. They were really upset when I

said I hadn't seen them. We're supposed to watch the next one tomorrow night."

"You like them?" Billy asked, pretending to be only mildly curious.

"They're great!" Steve said enthusiastically. "Dustin says I remind him of Luke Skywalker, maybe it's the hair."

Billy privately thought that if Steve were anyone, he'd be Princess Leia, because Billy was Han Solo and he liked the image of Steve by his side saving the galaxy. But he kept that thought to himself, because he didn't think Steve would take it as a compliment. Which it was. Princess Leia was badass.

"Luke is so cool," Steve continued, waving his hand in excitement, a bit of beer sloshing onto his sweater. "I mean he starts off as a nobody, living on Palpatine -"

"Tatooine," Billy said quietly. He ducked his head, the wide, amused smile spreading across his face.

"Bless you?" Steve squinted at him. "Was that a sneeze?"

"No, *Tatooine*," Billy said, sounding it out slowly. "That's the name of Luke's home planet. You said *Palpatine*. He's the Emperor."

Steve blinked at him. "How many times have you seen these movies?"

Billy had a brief flashback, the hours and hours spent at the theater, hiding away from the real world, from his father, from the ghost of his mother's memory that haunted the house. "Once or twice."

Steve stretched, stifled a yawn and Billy glanced at his watch.

"Shit," he whispered. It was almost 10:30. He hadn't even thought to look at the time, too engrossed in talking with Steve and the feel of his thigh against Billy's.

"Everything ok?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. Shit. I'm sorry." Billy stood, setting his beer on the coffee

table. "I have to go, curfew."

"Right." Steve stood, too, abandoning his beer and jogging over to the laundry room. Billy heard the dryer open and Steve returned, Billy's briefs in hand.

"You can keep mine for now. I'll just, um, get them later."

"Yeah. Later," Billy nodded, and his heart skipped a beat. The thought of seeing Steve later, not in school or at practice, but like this, made his head spin.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then?" He started towards the door, Steve following beside him, and slipped his boots on, fishing his keys out of his pocket.

"Tomorrow," Steve said, smiling slightly. He hesitated for a moment, shifting from foot to foot, then took a step forward, cupping Billy's face in his hands, and pressed a soft kiss to Billy's lips.

Billy sighed. His whole body felt light and airy, like he was weightless. This was the kiss he had been waiting for, so soft and sweet, and somehow much more intimate than making out in the hot tub.

Steve pulled away after a moment, cheeks pink. "Good night."

"Good night, Steve." Billy, hands unable to work properly, fumbled with the doorknob, finally getting it open and stepping out into the cold.

He heard Steve easing the door shut behind him. He stood for a moment, feeling dizzy, until he shook his head and jogged to his Camaro.

Billy left then, unable to wipe the giddy smile off his face. His whole body tingled, even the tips of his fingers and his toes.

By the time he got home, though, his smile slowly slipped away. The clock on the dash said 10:45 and the soft blue light from the living room was like a warning sign. *Don't go in there.*

It'd be better if he stayed out. But it was cold, and he had nowhere else to go.

His father opened the door when Billy's boots barely touched the front steps. His hand shot out in an instant, grabbing a fistful of Billy's shirt and yanking him over the threshold.

“ *What* did I tell you about curfew?”

Billy didn't fight back this time.

When it was over he sank to the floor, back against the living room wall and knees pulled in close to his chest, folding in on himself.

His whole body shook, not just his hands. He wrapped his arms around his legs and tried to hold himself together. He couldn't though, he wasn't strong enough, and when he felt the tears spilling from the corners of his eyes he didn't bother to brush them away or try to hide. His Dad already knew. There was no point. Everything had been so good, so good, mere minutes ago, and he hated himself for going there in the first place and for thinking that things like that could happen to people like him. Billy wondered whether he did really deserve this, here and now on the living room floor, wondered if his father had been right all this time and if there was something very, very wrong with him.

He heard his Dad breathing heavily. A long moment passed, and then his Dad crouched down beside him.

“Son,” he said softly.

He reached out to put a hand on Billy's arm, a hand so gentle that had moments before been so rough.

Billy looked up, blinking away the blurriness.

There was a sadness in his father's eyes, dark and blue like a stormy sea. Just like Billy's.

It was a sadness that was worse than the beating, because when his father looked at him like that Billy couldn't pretend he only hated his Dad. He couldn't pretend his Dad was a monster because those eyes,

full of worry, of guilt, were undeniably human and Billy *still* loved him, still wished (even though he knew, had known for a long time, that they were over) for the days when they watched *Star Wars* together and his father put his arm around the back of Billy's seat and laughed at all the funny parts. And that hurt so much more than the physical bruises.

There's something wrong with you, Billy.

"I'm doing this to help you. You understand that, don't you, Billy? Billy?"

"Yes, sir."

He didn't know when he fell asleep that night but it wasn't for a long time. He woke, it seemed, mere minutes later. When he sat up, groggy, rubbing sleepy seeds out of his eyes, he almost didn't remember the end of the evening. But then he stretched, and he felt the painful bruise in his side, the size of a boot.

He dressed messily, unfocused, accidentally putting a foot through his shirtsleeve.

All clothes on the right parts, he emerged from his bedroom, skipping over breakfast because he didn't think he could eat.

The three of them sat at the table, eating and drinking coffee, or orange juice, in Max's case. His Dad looked up when he entered the kitchen but otherwise ignored him. Susan smiled at him when he edged around his father, stopping at the counter in front of the coffee pot and pouring himself a cup.

Max, dousing her toaster waffles in syrup, was the only one who said "Morning", so he sat next to her.

In the car on the way to school that morning Max stared at him, eyes narrowing everytime he glanced over at her.

"What?" he snapped finally.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked.

Billy’s hands clenched around the wheel and he felt his stomach turn, his coffee stinging his throat and threatening to come back up. He didn’t want to hear those words, not from Max. He was trying with Max, trying so hard, because she was the only one who ever looked at him with concern these days.

Max poked him. “Billy? What’s wrong? You look -” she waved a hand in front of her eyes. “Like you’re in outer space.”

Billy breathed slowly out of his nose. That wasn’t what she meant.

“You ok?” Max looked worried.

“Yeah.” Billy ran a hand over his face. “I’m ok. Just tired.”

He suddenly felt the urge to talk, to babble until everything that weighed him down and made his shoulders hunch was out in the open. He wanted to tell Max about what was bothering him, at least some of it, and that was a strange feeling because he’d never had anyone to confide in before.

“And kinda...confused,” he sighed and the words came out, traveling on the wave of an exhale.

“About what?” Max asked. She tilted her head at him, looking genuinely curious.

“About,” Billy began, glancing at Max, who nodded at him, her orange hair untucking from behind her ear and falling over her shoulder.

Billy plowed on, the words fighting to come out first, unsure of what to say but saying it all anyway because Max actually wanted to listen to him.

“I, um, I think I really like someone. Really like them. But I think I like them way more than they like me. So much more than they like me. And I mean, shit, what if they don’t actually have feeling for me? What if they just want someone to fool around with, or they’re just playing a joke on me?”

He took a deep breath and pulled his cigarettes out of his pocket, fingers trembling slightly. He rolled the window down and lit one, sucking in slowly.

“Why would she be playing a joke on you?” Max asked, brow furrowing.

“I don’t know.” Billy didn’t correct her, just rested his left arm on the window, cigarette hanging between his fingers. “Maybe to be funny.”

“That’s not funny. That’s mean.” Max crossed her arms over her chest. “Is she the type of person who’d do something like that?”

“No,” Billy said hastily.

Max eyed him for a moment. “Have you asked her how she feels?”

“Shit, no, Max,” Billy laughed. “I can’t just go up and ask them.”

“Why not?” Max huffed.

“Because, I don’t know. People don’t do that.”

“People do that, Billy. You’re just too scared.”

“Shut up.”

Max grinned at him. “You really, really like her.”

Billy’s grimaced at her. He looked at the road and took another drag of his cigarette.

“You could write her a note if you’re too scared,” Max continued. “Circle ‘yes’ or ‘no’, that kind of thing?”

“I’m not doing that,” Billy snorted.

“Why not?” Max asked indignantly. “People do that all the time. It’s cute.”

“Not in high school.”

Max sat back in her seat, arms crossed. “Well they should. People do

that in middle school.” She put her feet up on the dashboard, melted snow smearing across the leather from her winter boots. “High school sounds stupid.”

“It is,” Billy said, finishing his cigarette and flicking it out the window. He slowed, turning into the school parking lot. “Feet down.”

She flipped him off (he snorted) but took her feet down, wiping the snow off with the sleeve of her puffy jacket.

They hopped out of the car, Max passing her skateboard to Billy, and Billy rolling his eyes but shouldering it all the same.

“See you after school,” he said. He dropped his hand down on the top of her head and messed up her hair.

“Get off, Billy,” she groaned. She ducked away, jogging towards the middle school, turning to call to him, “Write a love note! It’ll work!”

She gave him a thumbs up and darted off.

He didn’t see Steve until English class at second period. He was a couple minutes late (he liked to take a smoke break after first period, outside in the back parking lot reserved for staff, flirting shamelessly with the janitor who cleaned the back hallways at that time until she finally gave in and opened the doors for him).

Steve was already there at his desk, bending over in his seat to pull something out of his backpack, red sweater rucking up to reveal a thin sliver of pale skin and the top of his Calvins, forest green, peeking out from his jeans. Billy thought of Steve against him, in the hot tub under the water. His breath left him for a moment and he hesitated, until another straggler student behind him in the doorway cleared their throat impatiently.

Billy slid into his seat beside Steve, it was alphabetical, and set his notebook and copy of *Hamlet* on his desk. He reached into his front pocket and trading his pack of cigs for a single, chewed up Bic. He stole pens from Steve when he wasn’t looking, because Steve seemed to have an endless supply of them, and because Steve chewed on his pens when he was thinking critically, and there was something that

felt nice about the tiny weight of Steve's pen in his pocket, like he carried a stolen piece of Steve with him wherever he went.

"Hey," Steve murmured. Billy looked up at him, he'd been pretending to scan over their last section of *Hamlet*, though he already had read the play three times.

"Harrington." Billy smiled.

Steve smiled back at him, a small smile, just lips, but a pink flush spread up his neck and touched his ears.

Their teacher, an older man named Mr. Calhoun, a former hippie, with long gray hair pulled back in a ponytail and ties that clashed terribly with his sweater vests, started writing the assignment on the board: *Analyze a relationship between two (or more) characters*. He paired them up by proximity and Billy turned towards Steve.

"Alright," Steve said, picking up his pen and tapping it on his bottom lip. He flipped open his book. "I think we should write about the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia -"

"Do you think Horatio had the hots for Hamlet?" Billy asked. He leaned back in his seat, putting his hands behind his head and flashing a wide smile over at Steve. His shirt pulled up with the movement, up passed his navel, and out of the corner of his eye he saw a girl (Abby? He couldn't remember) turn, staring. Steve didn't look up, though.

Steve frowned, thumbing through the pages. "Which one is Horatio?"

"The gay one." Billy straightened, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I don't remember that part," Steve mumbled. His pen slipped in between his lips.

"Read between the lines."

"Huh?" Steve glanced up, pen in his teeth now.

"He calls Hamlet 'sweet lord'?" Billy tapped his own copy of *Hamlet*. "It's all here, Harrington."

“Yeah, but Hamlet loves Ophelia,” Steve argued. He sucked on his pen thoughtfully. “I mean, I think he does.”

“Horatio can love Hamlet even if Hamlet doesn’t love him. But Hamlet does love him. He says so.”

“But Ophelia -”

“He can love *both* of them.”

“Well...” Steve frowned at his book. “Yeah, that’s true.”

Billy spread his hands theatrically. “So write about that.”

“Ok, fine. You look up the quotes and I’ll write.” Steve nodded, taking his pen out from his mouth and uncapping it. He smiled slyly after a moment and leaned over the aisle to Billy’s desk.

“Do you think Han Solo had the hots for Luke Skywalker, too?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Billy grumbled, sinking low in his seat.

Steve snorted and turned back to his notebook.

The rest of the week, to Billy’s surprise, was the best handful of days he’d had in a long time. Steve stopped by his locker on Tuesday afternoon, smiling, and handed him a note, a torn scrap of paper that read in Steve’s neat handwriting “*Meet at the quarry at 4?*” There was no “circle yes or no”, and Steve had already breezed passed him, Billy could see his head bobbing in and out of students down the hallway. Billy thought Max might’ve been right, that notes were kind of cute. He slipped the paper into his front left pocket and kept it in there all week.

On Wednesday Billy met up with Steve outside the movie theater after dropping Max off at Lucas’s. They didn’t see a movie, but they spent the afternoon wandering around town, sharing Billy’s cigarettes.

On Thursday Steve pulled him aside once he left the lunchline, and

led him to the table in the back of the cafeteria, the one that was always empty (it was a perfect place if you needed to have a private conversation) and had “ *Hawkins sucks* ” carved into one of the chairs. A handful of people stared at them, including Tommy, who Billy hated but tolerated because he could be useful at times, and Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers. Steve sometimes sat with them but mostly sat with the rest of the basketball team.

On Friday Billy picked Steve up and they drove to the quarry at night, sharing a spliff and making out lazily to Led Zeppelin.

On Saturday Billy didn't see Steve, which made his stomach twist in knots, and his Dad did get mad at him, storming into his bedroom and snapping a Metallica in half, for forgetting to turn off the heat during the day.

Steve called him that evening, and they met up on Sunday to “study” in Steve's bedroom.

The next weeks passed in the same way, and Billy kept waiting for something to change, for Steve to stop wanting to spend time with him. But nothing changed.

January slowly melted into February, the brown grass peeked out from underneath the dirty snow, hopeful sparrows started their way back from the south, and the sun shone brighter and brighter with each passing day.

On the evening of Valentine's Day Billy paced the kitchen again, checking his watch every minute, fidgeting with his mother's necklace.

They didn't have specific plans for the night, but Steve had convinced his parents to take the evening off, go out to a fancy restaurant. Billy had been there for that conversation, sitting cross legged on the living room couch, Steve's English essay on his lap, red pen in hand. Steve and his mother were in the kitchen, and Billy heard the smoothness in Steve's voice. He sounded very convincing, even threw in something about “love never dies”.

Billy's father was home on Valentine's Day, working on his car out in the driveway.

"Billy!" Max said sharply.

"Huh?" He stopped pacing, glanced at his watch again, and looked over at her.

She was at the kitchen table, math homework spread out in front of her.

"What's up with you? I was saying your name for a whole minute just now."

"Sorry." Billy felt a tremor in his hands and he patted his pants pockets for his cigarettes.

"You look nervous," Max said, pointing her pencil at him. "Are you going on another date?"

Billy's cigarettes were in the car, on the dashboard where he'd tossed them when he came home. He crossed his arms over his chest and stuck his hand under his armpits.

"Yes."

Max stared at him for along time, abandoning her homework.

After a moment, her voice hushed as if she was too afraid to ask, she whispered "With a boy?"

His mouth felt very dry all of a sudden. He looked out the kitchen window, but his Dad was still outside in the driveway, bending over the hood of the car.

Billy crossed the room, pulling out the chair beside Max and sitting.

She watched him with wide eyes. She looked scared.

"Yeah," he sighed.

He remembered the last time Max had seen him with a boy, hadn't

understood, had gotten scared, and told her mother. Who told Neil. Who broke Billy's nose and carted them all off to a tiny town in Indiana where he thought there were no queer people at all to influence his son.

"Please don't tell anyone, Max," Billy said quietly. She still looked scared. "Please, Max. This is really important to me."

"Are you sick?" she asked quietly. The concern in her eyes was genuine and cut Billy to his core.

"No, I'm not sick," he murmured.

He stared at his hands, the barely healed blisters from weight lifting, the cuts and calluses from fist fights and punching walls when he got angry, his ragged nails that he chewed on when he worried, the cigarette burn on his left hand from the first time his Dad caught him smoking.

There's something wrong with you, Billy .

He willed his hands to stop shaking. He breathed in slowly, and exhaled, watching his hands until they stilled.

"I'm not sick, Max," he said again, a bit louder this time. He laid his hands flat on the table; they looked strong and steady. *Respect and Responsibility* . Resolve. "There's nothing wrong with me."

Max reached out, putting a small hand on top of Billy's, her soft palm covering the cigarette burn. "I won't tell anyone. I swear."

Billy smiled at her. His heart felt a little less heavy.

"Thanks, Max."

She took her hand away, pulling her homework towards her. "So. You like him?"

When he furrowed his brow at her she shrugged.

"You're never this nervous for dates," she said in explanation. "You act like an asshole, usually. You never act like this." She gestured at

him, at his state of being in general.

“Yeah. I like him.” Billy smiled.

“A lot?”

“A lot.”

“Can I meet him?”

“I - what?”

“I want to meet him.”

Billy stared at her. “You do?”

“Yeah.” Max shrugged. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I -” Billy scratched the back of his neck. Something in his heart felt warm, slightly uncomfortable, unfamiliar. “You really want to meet him?”

“Christ, yes, Billy. Do I need to spell it out for you?” She waved her pencil in his face. He swatted at it.

“Ok,” he said slowly. “I’ll, um, have you guys meet up sometime.”

“Cool.” Max nodded, going back to her homework.

That evening Billy lay under the blankets in Steve’s bed, on his back, staring up at the ceiling, thinking about what Max had said.

Steve lay curled up on one side, knees bent and arms hugging the blankets close to his chest.

“Your eyes are so blue,” he murmured.

Billy rolled over to face him, propping himself up on one elbow. He didn’t like his eyes. He wished his were brown, soft and deep like his mother’s. Like Steve’s.

"They're like, like," Steve started, frowning slightly, searching for the right word.

"Like the sea?" Billy guessed.

"No," Steve shook his head. "Your eyes are bright. Like....a lightsaber!"

"What?" Billy snorted. "No they're not."

"They are," Steve said firmly. "Like Luke Skywalker's lightsaber."

He reached out, prodding Billy in the chest. "The force is strong in you."

"Those kids are turning you into a nerd," Billy laughed.

"No more nerdy than you," Steve mumbled. He fingered Billy's necklace, thumb running over the pendant.

"What're you thinking about?" He let the pendant drop, running his hand up Billy's side. Billy smiled, catching Steve's hand and twining their fingers together. He kissed Steve's fingers softly.

"Max wants to meet you," he said quietly.

"She knows about us?" Steve asked, looking confused. They didn't have rules for this, but they both preferred not to tell anyone, because Billy didn't want anything to get back to his father, and they both knew that a relationship like theirs would not be met with much acceptance.

"Not really. She just knows I'm seeing someone. A boy. She's smart, she figured it out."

"Hm." Steve scooted closer, pushing his bare feet underneath Billy's legs. Billy winced; Steve's hands and feet were so damn freezing. But Billy allowed it, because if he tried to wriggle free Steve gave him that look, that sad, pleading look, with his brown eyes wide. And Billy was a sucker for Steve's eyes.

"I'd like to meet Max," Steve said.

“You look happy,” Max remarked one day in March. They were parked outside the arcade after school; her friends were waiting for her by the front doors.

“Huh?” Billy turned to her, cigarette hanging out his mouth, lighter in hand.

“You look happy,” Max said again. She shrugged. “You smile now. A good smile, not the creepy one - yeah, *that* one.” She added the last bit when Billy grinned at her, wide and toothy, cigarette between his teeth.

“It’s a nice look,” Max continued. “You don’t look like as much of a shitbird as you did before.”

Billy eyed himself in the rearview mirror. He had a yellowing bruise under one eyebrow, and his eyes still had bags under them, that purpleish puffiness because it was hard to sleep in that house, and it was really hard to sleep without Steve. But his eyes themselves looked bright, “like a lightsaber” Steve said, and when he thought about it, his irises were more like Max’s.

He blinked at his reflection. When he lifted the lighter to the cigarette between his lips his hands didn’t shake.

“Nice vocab word,” he said.

“Thanks. I learned it from you.” Max stuck her tongue out at him. She went to open the door, then hesitated, glancing at him over her shoulder.

“Do you wanna come in?” she asked, eyes unsure. “It’s just none of my friends play *Space Invasion* with me. They think it’s lame. But you played it with me that one time...” She trailed off, biting her lip.

Billy remembered the day clearly, one of the first weeks Susan and Max had moved in back in California. His Dad had been ok that week, hadn’t even raised his voice at Billy. When he went to pick Max up at the Arcade by the boardwalk she was standing at *Space Invasion* by herself, looking longingly over at a group of kids crowded

around *Tron* , laughing and jostling each other. Something in his heart hurt then, he wasn't sure what it was, but instead of waiting for her outside, he pushed his way through the arcade towards her, nudging her with his shoulder when he stood beside her. She looked up at him, surprised and scared, and he pulled his change out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Bet you can't beat me," he said. She smiled slowly, and said, "Just to warn you, I'm good."

"You don't have to," Max said quickly, turning away from him and opening the passenger door.

"Let's go." Billy pushed his door open, hopping out and tossing his half-smoke cigarette to the ground, snuffing it out with the heel of his boot.

He started to the Arcade and he heard Max scramble out of the car, jogging to his side, backpack bouncing on her shoulders.

"I've been practicing," she said excitedly. "I'm going to wipe the floor with you."

"You talk a lotta shit, Max. We haven't even started playing yet."

Her friends looked skeptically at her when she and Billy reached the front doors. Nancy Wheeler's brother and Dustin, Steve's friend, gaped at him when he followed them into the Arcade. Jonathan Byers' brother looked surprised but went along with it.

Lucas gave him a small smile. He'd been seeing a lot of Lucas over the past few months, dropping Max off and picking her up from the Sinclairs. He'd been seeing a lot of the Sinclairs in general over the last few months.

After a few times of picking Max up, Mrs. Sinclair had come out of the house, beckoning him inside, and calling "Come in, sweetheart, it's freezing. Max will be a couple minutes, they're finishing up the cookies." When he entered the Sinclairs house, feeling awkward and guilty, Max waved him over from her spot at the kitchen table. She and Lucas were spooning chocolate chip cookie dough onto a baking sheet. Lucas's sister, Erica, he learned later, sat at the table, not helping them but dipping her finger into the batter. When she caught

him looking she stuck her cookie dough coated tongue out at him.

After that, Mrs. Sinclair didn't let him wait in the car, and he finally gave up and started coming to the door, sometimes staying while Max and Lucas finished their homework, lending a hand to Mrs. Sinclair in the kitchen, or sitting with Mr. Sinclair in the family room, as they called it, talking about basketball, or ducking out of the way when Erica decided to throw stuffed animals at him, scampering up the stairs when her mother raised her voice.

He started bringing Lucas home from the Arcade or the Wheeler's or the Byers sometimes, offering to help since he would be getting Max anyway, shrugging it off when Mrs. Sinclair started thanking him profusely.

One night he came to get Max, letting himself in when Mr. Sinclair called "It's open!", and found Max and all the Sinclairs crowded around the television, familiar music playing from the speakers.

"We just started it, Billy," Max whispered, beckoning him over, patting the seat on the couch between her and Erica.

"Which one?" he asked, bending down to pull his boots off.

"*A New Hope*," Lucas said excitedly. "Erica's never seen it."

"And I told you I didn't want to watch it," Erica said loudly, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Her mom shushed her.

"Grab a drink from the fridge if you want, Billy," Mrs. Sinclair said.

"Just you wait, Erica," Mr. Sinclair said. "Cinematic masterpiece, this is."

Billy squeezed in between Max and Erica.

"I bet it's dumb," Erica grumbled.

The next time though, a few days later, when Billy came to get Max, Erica and Mr. Sinclair were out in the yard, play fighting with sticks, Mr. Sinclair making lightsaber noises and Erica screaming, "Your powers are weak, old man!"

Now, in the Arcade, Max was, in fact, kicking Billy's ass, while her friends cheered behind them.

Billy swore loudly when *Game Over* flashed across the screen. Max whooped and punched the air.

"Steve!" Dustin said suddenly, dashing towards the front doors. Billy snapped his head around. Dustin, practically bouncing on his heels in excitement, led Steve over to the group, mouth moving fast.

"And she beat the *shit* out of him, Steve," he concluded, cackling.

"Really." Steve smiled slowly at Billy.

Out in the parking lot, Dustin, Nancy's brother, and Jonathan's brother climbed into Steve's BMW while Max and Lucas made to jump in the Camaro. Steve stood beside Billy, hands in his pockets, smiling at the kids in his car, who were digging through the cassettes in his glove compartment.

"Max, c'mere a second!" Billy called.

Max shrugged to Lucas, already in the back, and jogged over to them.

"What?"

"Max," Billy said, faltering for a moment. He was nervous, which didn't make much sense to him, because Max already knew Steve, already liked him.

Steve tilted his head at him, looking bemused.

"Max," he said again. "This is Steve."

"Um?" Max glanced between the two of them. "What're you -"

Her eyes went very wide. "Oh. *Steve* . Steve?!"

"That's me," Steve said. His cheeks were red and Billy suppressed the urge to grab his face and kiss him in the middle of the parking lot.

Max punched Billy's shoulder. "You could've told me it was Steve!"

“You said you wanted to meet him. So, here, you’re meeting him.”

Max rolled her eyes at him. “You’re both ridiculous.”

She stalked over to the Camaro, grumbling over her shoulder, “And you’re very cute together.”

In late May, just a few weeks before graduation, Billy and Steve huddled together in Steve’s bed, abandoning their textbooks and flashcards on the floor.

They were taking a twenty minute break from studying that so far had lasted an hour, starting off with Billy grabbing Steve’s pen out of his mouth, tossing it to the floor and pushing Steve onto the bed, pulling Steve’s pants down around his ankles and sucking him off until Steve cried out a muffled “ *Billy!* ”, his own hand clamped over his mouth.

They’d been avoiding the studying ever since, crawling under the covers. Steve lay on his stomach, chin resting on a pillow. Billy lay beside him, propping himself up on one elbow, pushing Steve’s shirt up to his shoulders and connecting to the freckles on his back with one finger, creating constellations.

He took a break from the stars and tried drawing a map out of Hawkins. He’d helped Steve do a lot of packing in the last couple weeks. Steve was moving to Indianapolis, headed to Indiana University. When Steve, nervous, asked Billy to come with him, Billy had laughed, and said “You think I’d let you go without me?”

“I love you,” Steve murmured, turning his cheek to rest on the pillow and look up at Billy.

Billy smiled slowly.

He knew that he had been the one to come to conclusion first, the conclusion that he was absolutely head over heels for Steve Harrington. He knew it long before they started dating.

He knew it had to have started long even before then, perhaps that

very first night on Halloween when he saw Steve, across the sea of bobbing high school student heads, leaning against the wall, Ray Bans on indoors and black collar popped like Dallas Winston. He didn't know what it was then, he thought it was just because people called Steve the King, because Steve looked so ready to be ravaged, because Steve was the prettiest boy he'd seen in his life, and that was saying something because Billy had seen a lot of pretty boys in his young life.

He admitted it to himself right after he punched Steve, because the pain in his knuckles and in his neck was nothing compared to the shame and self-hatred that swallowed him whole every time he looked at Steve's face afterward.

He finally accepted that he had irreversibly fallen in love with Steve the first time they made love a week after Valentine's Day in the back seat of the Camaro. For Billy, it wasn't the during but the aftermath.

For Steve that had been the beginning - Billy could tell, from the rosiness in his cheeks and the way he looked down at Billy, palms flat on either side of Billy, flat against the cold leather of the seat, Billy's knees on his shoulders and ankles behind his neck. One thick piece of hair fell into Steve's beautiful brown eyes and Billy lifted one hand, tucking it back behind Steve's ear because he wanted to see those eyes, wanted to see the change in them that he knew was coming. Steve's lips parted and his breath hitched. He stared at Billy, in awe, as if he were truly seeing him for the first time.

For Steve that had been the beginning, but for Billy it had been the end. Not as if he were signing off, rather signing up. He knew then, in the aftermath, Steve lying on top of him, resting his ear against Billy's chest, reaching up to find Billy's hand and fold their fingers together, that he was undeniably in love, and that there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. So he stopped pretending that his world didn't revolve around Steve. He stopped pretending that he didn't already sign himself away to Steve - all of himself, mind, body, and soul, til death do he fucking die.

Billy knew, so long before Steve finally said it, that he loved Steve. But Billy was stubborn, emotionally stunted, and not at all prepared for how devastating at first and then utterly delightful it was to fall in

love with Steve Harrington.

So he didn't tell Steve he loved him. He waited. He wanted Steve to be the one to say it first. Steve must've known how Billy felt; he couldn't have missed it - sometimes he caught Billy staring, metaphorical hearts in his eyes, and smiled smugly at Billy.

But he waited until Steve said it first, partially because he was a stubborn ass, partially because he was still insecure and needed to know for sure, but mostly because the opportunity was too good to pass up.

And now the opportunity had presented itself.

Smiling, Billy tucked a piece of hair behind Steve's ear, leaned down to kiss his forehead.

"I know," he said.